

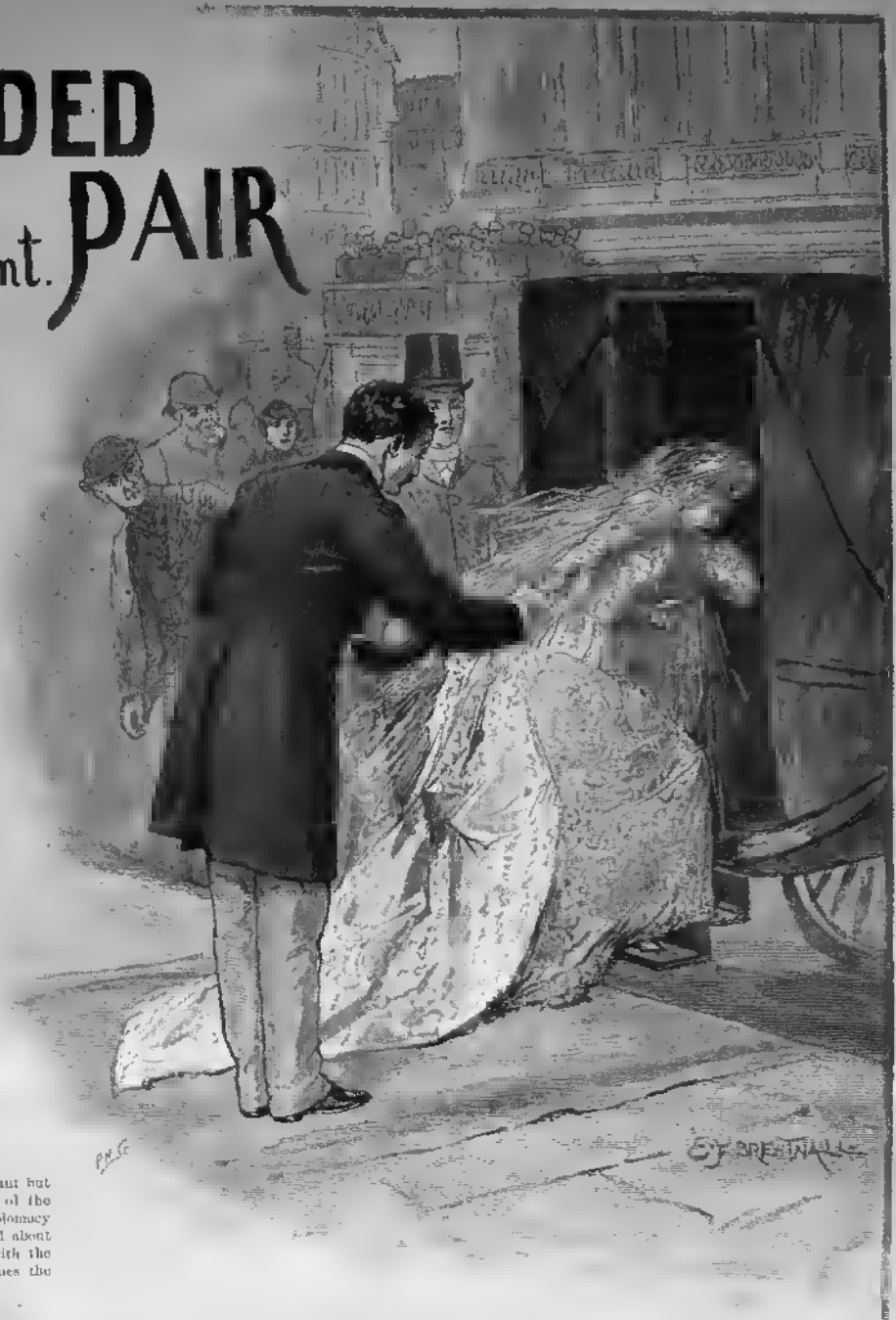
A DIVIDED PAIR

by Mrs. Oliphant.

CHAPTER I.

THEY leave his wife at the church door! The newspapers would describe it as a romance in real life, an incident for a novel, the subject of a play, everything that a man would least like his marriage to be: the most vulgar romance in the world, a sort of thing which would almost justify a man in taking up another romantic role—the rôle of the bridegroom-villain, who does not appear at all, even at the church door, but insults the pale bride by exposing her to all the comments and the pity of her friends. Nothing but romance, anyhow, confound it! Maurice Mostyn was not a man who could afford to be romantic. It is the last thing that commends itself to a man who is in Society, yet is by no means sovereign in Society. There are people who can carry that sort of thing off. It does not much matter, for instance, what a young duke does, or how much he gets him-*self* talked about. Probably he never knows of it up in the sublime regions where he lives: probably he rather likes it, as a homage to his position, and a proof how great the general interest is in dukes. Nor does it at all matter to a millionaire struggling into standing ground, whose romantic story will call attention and rouse people to a consciousness of his name. But romance is fatal to a young man with just a young man's position and no more, who is asked out to the best houses but only as one among a crowd, yet whom everybody knows, in that curious completeness of knowledge which is proper to Society—everything about him—and who is called familiarly by his christian name by some thousands of people. A romantic story about such a man runs far and wide. It flies through the clubs, it penetrates to the very heights of the service to which he belongs—civil or military: it probably goes even to Windsor, and is remembered there for ever. What a fool a fellow must be to get himself talked of like that! people say. And yet what would the unfortunate man do?

He was a man attached to the Foreign Office, but not in the sprightly way of attachéship or even clerkship. He was one of the far more important but less dazzling persons who are sent off to the ends of the world on private missions, who burrow into the diplomacy of Russia, or of the Oriental Powers, who know all about things that nobody else knows, and are familiar with the secret intrigues of potentates with whose very names the



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rest of the world is unacquainted. He could talk his way to the Great Wall of China, people said, and, perhaps, farther than that. He could turn himself into a Persian, or a Chinese, or a Bedouin, and the two to which he thus joined himself at a moment's notice would never find the imposture out. It was imposture, it is true, but, as it was in the service of his country, this never troubled Mostyn's conscience. He was the kind of man of whom such stories are easy to believe—a man who, though he was an unmistakable English gentleman, was scorched and dried into a sort of desert colour, the colour of the endless sands and yellow rocks, no colour at all, you might say, and yet a high tone when compared with the pale faces of the drawing-rooms. He was a man whom the sun had dried and scorched, and whose eyes had the watchful, ever-attentive look of one who has often carried his life in his hand, and whose keen outlook, while scanning even the faintest intimation of danger, was his chief defence. That he should have fallen in love with little Sybil Somerville in her first season was wonderful enough; yet not so wonderful—for to a man out of the desert what could be so attractive as that little dainty creature, all bloom and freshness like a flower—for that she should have fallen in love with him, rather than with one of the curled darlings so much more like herself who surrounded her, and to whom old Somerville's daughter and only child was very well worth looking after, however highly placed they might be. When it was found that Sybil would have no one but that sand-coloured Foreign Office man, whom many people called "the Arab," there was much gnashing of teeth and tearing of hair in Grosvenor Place. It was, to tell the truth, Sybil herself who was most merciful about it: for the thought of her money overwhelmed Mostyn. He did not mind a little money with the woman he

was going to marry. It would be so much better for herself on the frequent occasions when he would have to leave her, in pursuance of his arduous and not too well remunerated profession. But he was overawed by the great fortune that was at little Sybil's back, and declared openly that he never would have allowed himself to think of her had he known in time. But she had set her heart upon him as something entirely out of the common, and though Lady Somerville scattered her locks to the wind (it was so easy to buy a more becoming front at Truett's, any day), and old Sir Matthew sat for days together and growled, and would speak to no one, yet the girl had her way. It was known that Mostyn was under orders to proceed to the end of the world in a very short time, which at the last was what sweetened the bitter pill to her father and mother. The child would have her gorgeous wedding, would receive her innumerable presents, and go off on her honeymoon, and enjoy herself or not as might be. And then she would come back to her parents, and the husband would be swept off into the unknown, and possibly never come back again to trouble anybody. That is always on the cards when a man is sent into the mysterious East. And, accordingly, the wedding-day was fixed at last. She knew she would have to part with him in a shorter or longer time, as the Foreign Office should please. And he knew that he would have to go and leave her, but not—good heavens!—not on the wedding-day!

The poor fellow had for the moment a sort of access of madness when he got the dispatch—the day before the wedding! He would not go. He would throw up everything—service of the country, orders of the F.O., hopes of advancement—everything! He would not be ordered off like a slave, taken out of his place like a horse, discharged like a cannon, without any will

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When he got to the gate, fear, and the flutter of an almost desperate hope, got the better of him.

of his— But soon this fever fit went off, leaving him cold. Without the F.O. he was nothing—a younger son, without either money or place in the world; whereas Mostyn of the Foreign Office was a man who was known, a celebrity in his way, acknowledged to be one of the best men in the service. It was his chief defence against the appalling wealth of these Somerville people. If he were to throw it up he would be at their mercy. And it was his profession, which a man cannot give up. Mostyn he recommended himself to the dreadful necessity, sent out a servant as keen and almost as experienced as himself to secure at a few hours' notice, as can always be done in London, an outfit very different from the bridegroom's trappings which that functionary had been packing so neatly. And then he set out for Grosvenor Place, to break the terrible news—turning over and over in his mind one of the phases of desperation which had seized hold upon him. Surely there would be human feeling enough in their hearts to let her go with him as far as Vienna—as far as Constantinople, where he might have to wait a few days—surely, surely they would do something to prevent the odious publicity and barbas and ridicule of that parting at the church door! I don't say that it was the ridiculous only he felt. He felt bitterly the parting, the horrible disappointment, the feeling of life turned into a mockery and misery; but the last element of all was the laughable laughter which he knew would mingle with everybody's pity. Surely they would feel, even for Sybil's sake if not for his, that this must not be!

He went in with such a face of misery that he scarcely needed to tell his tale and show his telegram.

"Send to-morrow—to-morrow!" both the ladies cried, Sybil in a flutter of changing colour from white to red, her mother people with indignation. The girl clasped her arms round his, and leaned upon him, laying her head against his arm, half-fainting. Lady Somerville raved, and all but swore. "Leave to-morrow—leave Sybil—leave my daughter at the church door!" Her voice grew choked at last in the vehemence of her passion. She spoke as if she did it on purpose, by way of a studied insult to him.

"I have come to show myself on your mercy," he said. "Let her go with me, Lady Somerville! Let me take her as far as Constantinople! I know it's a great thing to ask, but I may have to wait there for instructions—and news can tell. They may be all ready, or I may have to wait them. Everything will be comfortable. I have to spend a day and a night in Vienna, and she wouldn't mind the journey! You won't mind the journey, would you, Sybil, with me? It is our only chance," he cried, "to avoid this horrible tragedy of a parting at the church door!"

"Is that all you are thinking of?" cried the unreasonable mother, who had just herself been insisting upon it with all the heat of fury.

"Would you like me to tell you all I am thinking of?" said Mostyn, whose passion of disappointment and mortification and wounded love and baffled hope was stronger even than hers. "Let me have this little alleviation, and I will be grateful to you all my life."

"Do you mean to take my daughter to—Timbuctoo, or wherever you are going, Mr. Mostyn, to perish among savages? Is that what you dare to propose to me? Perhaps that was what you meant all the time. To carry my Sybil off into the desert, where I should never hear of her again!"

"Oh! mamma," cried Sybil in remonstrance, still holding him by her husband's arm.

"I have told you what I mean," said Mostyn, keeping his temper with an effort—"to take her with me as far as Constantinople. It is not such an alarming journey—there

are *zouks* de luxe and all that. I have to stop at Vienna for information, then at Constantinople, perhaps to wait there till my instructions are complete. It is the best time for travelling now, in the spring, it will not be too hot. There is nothing to be afraid of in the journey. Sybil, you would come, wouldn't you? I could take you up the Bosphorus—it is the most lovely place in the world."

"And après, Mr. Mostyn?" said the mother.

They looked at each other for a moment, two enemies facing each other before the battle began.

"Applique if you did not take her with you into the desert—you mean to leave Sybil, my child, to return from that outlandish place alone."

It was on Mostyn's lips to ask what difference it made to the facts that it was *his* child upon whom this fate had fallen! but he restrained himself. "There is nothing impossible in it," he said, "with her good moods, and every arrangement made for her comfort. Many ladies do it. And I could send Hambold with her, who knows every step of the way."

"Hambold! your servant! to bring back my daughter, who has never done anything for herself, never needed to take a railway ticket or order a carriage, or—"

"I assure you, Lady Somerville, there is nobody better qualified to take the charge of all that than Hambold!"

"Perhaps to act as her companion too," cried the mother, furious. And then, carried beyond herself by her passion, she appealed to heaven and earth whether she had not always been sure that there would be some accident of this kind—always known, when Sir Matthew gave his consent in spite of all she could say, that it would turn out badly, and her poor child be forsaken. Poor little Sybil's eyes of "Mamma, mamma!" which was all she could oppose to this storm, were of little effect; and the silence of Mostyn, who let it all pour forth without any reply, aggravated the rage which of all things in the world could bear silent opposition least. And Sir Matthew, stung by the sound, came in; and he took upon himself an air of virtuous indignation which was still more hard to bear than his wife's rage, treating the whole matter as a wild device on the part of Mostyn to embarrass the family and put them to shame.

"What object could you have in forcing us to all these preparations, to all the expense and fuss, in order to turn upon us at the last moment?" cried the old gentleman.

"If I had any object," cried Mostyn in reply, "it could only be to make myself very unhappy and very ridiculous, which was not very likely to be my aim."

Sir Matthew stared for a moment, and then asked with scorn what his unhappiness mattered?

"Your unhappiness! Look at that child, and look at her mother; and all our habits hurried with, and our engagements disturbed, and the house turned upside down. I'll tell you what, Sir," cried the old gentleman, "since you think so little of interfering with our arrangements, I'll rat the knot for you. There shall be no wedding at all! It's better to break it off at the last moment than to have a wife that's no wife—thrown back on our hands, and all the talk that will get up. My lady," he cried out, "go to your desk this moment, and write to all those people that there will be no wedding, and the marriage is broken off!"

Angry as Lady Somerville was, however, she did not go so far as this. A marriage broken off the day before the wedding is a very serious thing. To describe how the day went on, in a succession of furious and aggrieved discussions, would be very unnecessary, even if there were room for it—which there is not. Sybil alone gave her bridegroom a strong but silent support. She said little poor little thing!—except now and then a cry of "Papa! papa!" or "Mamma! mamma!" when things were at their hottest. She stood holding Mostyn's arm with both her own, holding him fast, saying nothing even to him. She was so young, so shy, so little accustomed to hold her own, which had been given to her without contention all her life. It astonished her more than words can say to find herself the subject of such red-hot controversies. But I need not say that every moment spent in discussion made it more and more impossible that the wedding, all arranged for to-morrow, the bishop who was to perform it, the Princess who was to be present, the fashionable mob which had sent presents and arranged all its engagements so as to be there, rustling in silk and satin, or with white waistcoats and gaudiness, could be put off, or still worse, broken off. The presents themselves would have been enormous and costly.

"What should we do with them?" said Lady Somerville to her husband. "That lovely thing the Princess gave her, and all the lists made up for the newspapers, with everybody's names—printed by this time, and can't be recalled. Besides, the talk it would make! And there is really nothing against him; and we knew that this appointment was hanging over his head. And if he were to be driven in despair, as he partly threatened, to give up the service?"

"What does it matter to me if he gives up the service? Do you think I will give my daughter to a man who is nothing and has nothing, a mere burden on our hands?"

"I knew you would think that," said Lady Somerville, slowly. "His Foreign Office connection is really the only thing—and no one knows what it may come to—I would not be afraid of giving it up."

There is nothing so effectual in restoring an angry woman to her reason as for her husband to lose his. I do not know if

it tells vice versa, but, when Sir Matthew began to vapour about "my daughter," Lady Somerville saw that it was about—as if the fact that Sybil was his daughter could have any thing to do with the sending away of her bridegroom. But neither of them was accessible to reason upon the one point for which Mostyn pleaded till the last moment. That Sybil, a bride of eighteen, should make her way back from Constantinople alone—even if it had been possible to allow her to be sprinkled away there, such a tremendous journey—was a thing that neither father nor mother would hear of. In charge of Hambold and her maid! The thing was out of the question, however true it might be that Hambold knew every step of the way and that Mostyn's wife might travel like a princess, glorified by her husband's name. There was nothing for it after all, but that ridiculous parting by the church door.

CHAPTER II.

Mostyn was a little more than a year away. He had accomplished a most difficult mission, and covered himself with glory. I decline to mention what that mission was: the secrets of the Foreign Office are safe in my hands. What savage potentates he mastered—what subtle, half-completed treaties with other Powers he discovered and made waste-paper of, are things with which the present writer and reader have nothing to do. On his way home, at last, more scorched, more dried up by desert winds and burned by tropical suns than ever, he fell ill at Vienna, and lay there for a long time unable to convey any news of himself to the outer world. It is true, of course, that his illness was known at the Embassy, and the news conveyed to the Foreign Office: from whence it crept into the newspapers; but it was not sent to Sir Matthew Somerville; and, as the family was now in the country, it happened that a long time elapsed, and no news of her husband reached Sybil. There had been but few letters all the time, as may be readily supposed; but to know that he must now be within the circle of civilisation, and to hear nothing, was hard. When he was able to write, his letters were not kept from her—the father and mother, whatever their schemes might be, did not descend to the meanness of intercepting letters, though they did conceal from her the news of his illness, which they themselves were aware of through the medium abroad of the papers. It rankled in Sybil's mind very much that he should have been absent three weeks in Vienna, as it turned out, without writing to her—for, naturally, when he did write he made as light of his illness as possible; and it gave poor Mostyn in his convalescence a heavy heart to think that they must have known he was ill, and that it never came



They followed him to the door in the forenoon of their wedding, driving him fast. He turned on the threshold to wave his last adieu.



The knot was cut by Sybil, who came stealing in with hesitating steps.

into his wife's mind so much as to think of coming to nurse her husband. There was a cloud upon both when the time of his return came. She did not even come to London to meet him, which surely, surely she might have done; but awaited his arrival in the country, in the north, a day's journey from town, and where he could not go till he had delivered his report to the Foreign Office, and communicated all the information that was wanted. As soon as this was done, Mervyn left London by the first train, full of an eagerness modified by alarm and anxiety. Not even a letter from Sybil in town, only one from Sir Matthew to say that he would be expected by the train he had mentioned. Why did not Sybil write? His wife, bearing his name, yet waiting coldly in the depths of the country, not even sending him a word of welcome! There was not even a carriage to meet him at the station, which, however, was one of those misadventures which occasionally happen just in the nick of time, to aggravate everything without his privy on the part of anyone principally concerned. This gave Mervyn's hopes almost the last blow. He asked

himself what they could mean, what Sybil could mean, as he drove along the country road in the 'gig which was all he could find at the little rural station. He had been almost certain that, at least, she would come to meet him there.

When he got to the gate, four, and the driver of an almost desperate horse, got the better of him. He put off the reins a little by dismissing his gig there. Rutland was coming with his baggage by a later train, that baggage which he had picked up for his wife. Would she have them, now that they were here? He dismounted the gig, and walked up the avenue, his heart sick with eagerness and anxiety and pain. To see Sybil with an upturned face was, he felt, almost more than he could bear.

And here an incident occurred which does not tell for very much in the story of Mervyn's trouble, but which at first sight seemed to do so, and was of the nature of an incident in a novel. There were some wonderful old holly hedges at Sir Matthew Somerville's place, of which the family was very

proud, and at the upper end of the avenue one of these hedges separated from it the old-fashioned downy garden. It was so thick and so high that nothing was visible on the other side, but it did not impede the passage of wind; and poor Mervyn started as if he had been shot, and came to a sudden pause, as he heard on the other side Sybil's voice. His wife's voice—which he had last heard pronouncing the vows which were to have made them one—the soft little tones, so young, almost childish, in contrast with all the rude voices of alien life amid which he had been since—affected him more than any roar of warfare could have done. To think that these little musical tones might reject him, defy him, was impossible—it was impossible! They were made for nothing but sweetness, for gentle words and assent. But she was talking to someone; another voice mingled with hers, and it was the voice of a man. Some fellow was walking with her in the garden. If Mervyn had been armed, as he had been for most of the past twelvemonth, with pistols at his belt, I don't whether, fresh as he was from single life, that fellow would have been safe.

